

Trans, Feminism: Or, Reading like a Depressed Transsexual

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T*rans and feminism*, it seems, are caught in a continually reiterated conflict, driven by the search for an integrated theory of gender that is undermined by the political desires of each field, a version of what Robyn Wiegman calls the endless “conundrum” that follows from the desire for social justice, which propels scholars to endlessly reach for the “right discourse, object of study, or analytic tool” that will make our “critical practice . . . adequate to the political commitments that inspire it” (2012, 3). This commitment to the political differentiates “identity knowledges” from other fields, as adequate knowledge tends to be that which produces (forms of) social justice, often premised on the affirmation of the objects of knowledge as legitimate objects, legitimate producers of knowledge, legitimate modes of life, and, particularly, good ways of life (Wiegman 2012, 3). Focusing, in particular, on how transmasculinity has increasingly posed an un- or misrecognized problem for imagining trans-inclusive feminisms, this essay suggests that work in trans studies and feminist studies dramatizes the promise and limits of the obligation to do justice in these terms. However, rather than seeking new terms of resolution, I excavate the depressed transsexual as a position from which to think through living with the lack of trans(masculine)feminist integration, even if it does not feel good.

My title is an evocation of an evocation: I am referencing Henry Rubin’s “Reading Like a (Transsexual) Man” (1998), which in turn gestures to a flurry of scholarship in the 1980s in which literary critics debated the politics and possibility of men reading “like (or as) women” (305). Like mine, Rubin’s essay builds on this conversation about a kind of transgendered reading to ask after the relationship between transmasculinity and feminism. However, implicitly, I also invoke *reading* in the sense of queer-of-color slang: the art of in-group critique, a practice of imaginative insult that both signifies and produces a shared world. In this spirit of reading, I linger on

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Rubin's essay both because it has made mine possible and because it illustrates the odd narrative tangle that attends a transmasculinity that desires to be feminist but that, because of the imperative of affirmation, disavows girlhood. In Rubin's case, this disavowal is relatively benign, but when carried through to the logical limit, transmasculine projects that disavow their attachments to girlhood tend to reproduce and reinforce $m > f$.¹

In particular, Rubin's essay strangely relies on the "hegemonic narrative construction of transsexuals" (*I always knew I was a boy*) at the same time that it works to model counterhegemonic, feminist transmasculinities (1998, 309). For example, in order to debunk a narrative that grants female-to-male (FTM) trans people feminist status due to the shared experience of female embodiment, Rubin invokes the hegemonic trans narrative to insist that FTMs never were women or girls and because of this "do not interpret their bodies like other female-bodied people. Instead transsexuals develop subjectivities that are specifically transgendered" (Rubin 1998, 309). Therefore, experiences that might seem "eminently female" are interpreted through these transgendered subjectivities, leading to different outcomes. Rubin provides the example of a woman who encounters a stranger while walking alone at night and crosses to the lit side of the street to make herself less vulnerable to attack. According to Rubin, an FTM in the same situation would cross to the darker side of the street to avoid detection as gender nonconforming. While perfectly reasonable, to use this as a definitive example of "same bodies, different vulnerabilities, different courses of action" requires a series of disavowals of what constitutes FTM life history (Rubin 1998, 309–10). There is no space in Rubin's account for an FTM who presents as a woman or girl, whose movements are conditioned by his once appearing to be a girl, and so on. Furthermore, although Rubin relies heavily on autobiographical evidence, he includes no scenes from before he went to college. Part of what allows Rubin to stick to the narrative of never having been a girl, it seems, is an impossible narrative of having never been a child.

Of course, the hegemonic construction is not the only available trans narrative. In fact, in an essay collected with Rubin's in *Men Doing Feminism* that also theorizes the relation between transmasculinity and feminism, C.

¹ Janet Halley (2006) offers a helpful shorthand for what she deems a minimalist description of a feminist project. First, a feminist project makes a distinction between something *f* (women, female, and/or femininity) and something *m* (men, male, and/or masculinity); Halley's shorthand for this is *m/f*. Next, it posits "some kind of subordination . . . in which *f* is the disadvantaged or subordinated element," or $m > f$ (Halley 2006, 18). Finally, it opposes this subordination or carries a brief for *f*. In many ways, this essay is a meditation on the persistence of *m/f* as a way of dividing up the world, particularly in contexts where it is taken for granted that *m/f* does not do justice as a description of the gendered landscape.

Jacob Hale assumes that FTMs “have lived parts of our lives as girls and as women” (Hale 1998, 101). Rather than trying to produce a coherent subject by means of narrative, he locates the source of incoherence in the linguistic structures in which narrative must be produced. To make this point, Hale offers a scene in which his father cannot find a way to tell a story about Hale as a child: “When Jake was a little boy . . . , I mean a little girl . . . , I mean a little child . . . , he . . . , I mean she . . . , I mean . . . , I don’t know what I mean!” (111). While Rubin smooths over these narrative stumbling blocks, in Hale’s essay, rather than being denied or displaced, the girl lives on as a “Ghostly Memory in [His] Throat.”

Here is where the unaccounted for term, *depressed*, comes into play. Hale’s ghost behaves remarkably like the not-quite-lost object incorporated into the ego of the Freudian melancholic: “the shadow” of the girl, that abandoned object that both is and is not the self, “[falls] upon the ego,” leaving both open to scrutiny (Freud [1917] 1953, 249). Importantly, a certain level of ambivalence toward the object defines both cases, and both Hale and Freud grant this condition an epistemological usefulness. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud wonders why “a man has to be ill” in order to develop a “keener eye for the truth” about himself ([1917] 1953, 246). Likewise, Hale develops the ghost metaphor through María Lugones’s concept of world-traveling (Lugones 1987), arguing that transmasculine people flit along the borders of multiple gendered worlds, which grants them a “better epistemological subject position . . . to engage this task of re-creating manhood” (Hale 1998, 121). Furthermore, while Hale does not use the language of melancholia, he does describe this better epistemological position as being necessarily linked to the “anguish” of unintelligibility (115). Hale has written the guide on how to do trans studies without replicating structures that rendered trans people mute objects of pathologizing discourses (1997). Yet here, by figuring the trans body as haunted, and painfully so, Hale risks an association with what has been considered a pathological psychic process in order to develop a different kind of narrative ethics and to produce an attachment between FTM lives and the production of feminist knowledge.

Likewise, in *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (2010), Gayle Salamon argues that the insistence on “real” internal gender that Rubin’s hegemonic narrative relies on denies the profoundly social nature of the process by which all people come to have a body and a self. Although she approaches the issue tentatively and obliquely, it would seem that, for her, the high stakes of reembedding the trans body in its social world have to do with the troubling status of the feminine within transmasculine discourse. During the course of a reading of Griffin Hansbury’s

(2005) “The Middle Men: An Introduction to the Transmasculine Identities,” Salamon observes: “It reads as significant that the structural positions occupied by the feminine in this text are quite limited. The feminine others that appear here—the lesbian partner of the butch who forbids transition and the homo- and transphobic straight-identified partner of the woodworker—are figures of denial and negation. . . . Does the voice of the other, particularly the feminine other, always only say no, replace a true identity with the prescription of a false one, hinder transition or threaten to leave because of it?” (Salamon 2010, 122). Salamon worries that, although accounts like Hansbury’s demonstrate differences among transmasculine identities—debunking the assumption that transition is always motivated by an aspiration to a single, heteronormative ideal—they do so by merely displacing sameness. Difference among transmasculinities, that is, appears most clearly in homosocial contexts that rely on the evasion or disavowal of the feminine other, whose own desire for self-identity threatens the transmasculine self with annihilation.² Thus, Salamon leaves us with a provocative question about a transmasculinity that requires the appearance of a stable self: “If the goal is to achieve a stable and enduring sense of self-identity, is there room for a transmasculine subject to encounter the other’s desire without evacuating or annihilating it? Or feeling evacuated or annihilated by it in turn?” (122).

Annihilation, in Salamon’s account, seems most nearly to mean having one’s identity denied or substituted for another from the outside. In taking up Salamon’s question, I also take up her language of annihilation. However, while my use retains her meaning, it also includes the bad feelings and potential life-or-death consequences that attend being the object of this denial. Consequently, the term is slippery. While these meanings importantly often work in concert with each other to limit some people’s life chances, sometimes they do not. Hale’s haunted trans person models one way of productively thinking from within the feeling of annihilation. However, although grounding feminist transmasculine discourse in a model of FTM melancholia may provide a way to avoid relying on “a closed circuit of identity that runs the risk of eliding or evading difference rather than engaging with it” (Salamon 2010, 120), it is unclear how melancholia, if it is the inescapable process of ego formation by which the (trans) self is made, could be a

² If this seems abstract or absurd, one need only think of how *The L Word* handles its transmasculine character, Max. When Max socialized mainly within the lesbian world, the writers presented him as utterly out of place, having legitimate claim neither to this world nor to the world of normative manhood. It isn’t until the show introduces a gay male love interest for Max—a queer homosocial world—that Max becomes legible as a stable, transmasculine subject. See seasons 3–6 of *The L Word*, 2006–9, produced by Showtime.

position one can take up vis-à-vis the contest between (feminine) desire and (stable, transmasculine) identity.

My use of *depressed*, then, bears some relation to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (2003) use of Melanie Klein's *depressive position* insofar as it names a particular form of feeling and habit of thought that informs interpretive practice. However, the depressed transsexual is specific to my interrogation, as they are a figure that emerges from the trans archive and against which the affirmative project of trans studies has been staged.³ For instance, while Sandy Stone's pathbreaking "The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" (1992) is primarily a response to antitrans feminism, before the manifesto reaches this most obvious and most often-remembered target, Stone takes on psychiatric texts that link trans identity to mental illness and characterize transsexuals as a class of "depressed, isolated, withdrawn, schizoid individuals" (1992, 153) in order to legitimize knowledge produced by trans people. By pointing to irregularities in the research subjects represented in studies that produced this and similar claims, she then immediately negates their validity: "We find that each investigator invalidates his results in a brief disclaimer. . . . In the first, by adding 'It must be admitted that Lothstein's subjects could hardly be called a typical sample, as nine of the ten studied had serious physical health problems' . . . and in the second, with the afterthought that '82 percent of [the subjects] were prostitutes and atypical of transsexuals in other parts of the world'" (153). Undoubtedly, a sample that isn't representative of a population should never be thought to stand in for that population, and such studies have had lasting negative effects on trans life. However, there are several assumptions underlying Stone's argument that structure much trans-affirmative discourse and that my reading like a depressed transsexual is intended to push back against. First, there is the assumption that sex workers—likely poor, likely non-white—and disabled trans people are not and should not be considered representative, should not appear at the center of discourse about trans lives. Second, and related, is the assumption that *if* the transsexuals represented

³ I use *they* as a singular, gender-neutral pronoun, largely because it is currently one of the most prevalent self-selected neutral pronouns among trans and gender-nonconforming people. Additionally, "they" stresses the multiplicity involved in (trans) identity, allowing for both/and identification, in addition to neither/nor. This emphasis on both/and is especially important as it highlights one of the assumptions undergirding my use of *transmasculinity* and *transfemininity*. These terms are limited in that they appear to simply reinscribe the binary sex/gender system, linking trans maleness with masculinity and trans femaleness with femininity. Still, they are, for now, the best words I have to communicate that trans genders are always articulations of available forms of masculinity and femininity, even as they are also disidentifications with them.

in these studies are “depressed, isolated, withdrawn, schizoid individuals,” it is *because* they are sex workers and/or disabled. *Trans*, that is, has no relationship to these pathologized forms of feeling, but these other marginalized social positions might. And, finally, Stone seems to assume that depression and a (too-)rich internal world are characteristics that cannot be incorporated into agential and authoritative personhood, that in order to do work that affirms trans people as living viable lives, bad feelings must always and only be seen as coming from the outside. Following Stone’s example, much work has been done that argues for a productive nonidentity between diagnostic standards for gender and transsexual self-knowledge, but we have yet to question how evaluative standards of emotion and cognition have similarly shaped and limited trans discourse.

That is, *depressed* also marks my attachment to taking seriously the challenges that disability studies poses to the affirmative desires animating identity knowledges in general. For example, in *Disability Theory*, Tobin Siebers (2008) argues that much existing theory that purports to take the body as its object fails to adequately account for pain. Pain, according to Siebers, is theorized as either regulatory or resistant, a blunt effect of power or, otherwise, a resource for reconfiguring the body and its pleasures; it is never figured as a mundane, albeit unpleasant, fact of being embodied (2008, 59–64).⁴ His commitment to theory that can account for the mundane persistence of pain that does not give way to pleasure, that is certainly exacerbated by structural or ideological conditions but would exist nonetheless, is provocative largely because this theory requires rethinking what our commitments to our objects of study might actually be. What would it mean to do minoritarian studies without being driven by the desire to rehabilitate the subjects/objects of our knowledge? What kind of theories would we produce if we noticed pain and, rather than automatically seeking out its source in order to alleviate it, or mining it for resources for perverse or resistant pleasures, we instead took it as a fact of being embodied that is not necessarily loaded with moral weight?

⁴ In a recent special issue of the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer (2014a) build on the work of feminist disability studies scholars to develop what they term *cripistemologies*. The contributors to this issue are interested in what and how disability allows one to know, and it represents a sustained effort to rethink some of disability studies’ own refusals to think with pain. While there isn’t space to fully elaborate my own indebtedness to feminist/queer/antiracist strains of disability studies, which have done much of the work of making bad feelings available for thought, I’d like to note that I’ve found the work of Mel Y. Chen, Eli Clare, Alison Kafer, Anna Mollow, Jackie Orr, and Margaret Price particularly indispensable.

Depression fits into this picture at a slightly haphazard angle, as cognitive and affective impairments have appeared much less frequently as primary lines of inquiry. One exception, Lennard J. Davis's essay "Depression and Disability" (2014) might offer some insight into why much disability studies scholarship seems to have such a hard time with bad feelings. Davis's essay performs a reading that spars with the medical model that defines depression as a biochemical imbalance to be corrected and insists instead that what is disabling about depression is a neoliberal society in which membership is premised on productivity and positive affect. Ultimately, Davis insists that reimagining depression outside of the medical model offers an empowering political stance to be taken up and that this stance will offer one route "out of the abyss" of acute sadness and despair (2014, 66–67).

Herein lies the complication that mood disorders pose to the social model that underlies much of the foundational work in disability studies. Davis is motivated to write this essay out of a deep suspicion of the "overcoming" narratives in popular depression memoirs and pharmaceutical commercials but, in the end, offers the disability studies model of depression as a possible route to, well, overcoming depression: "While I don't want to downplay the difficulties and pain of acute sadness and despair, and I don't want to minimize the pain and difficulty of having impairments in general, the overall message of disability studies is that there is a bright side, a very bright side, to being a person with a disability. Why cannot we shine that brightness onto the darkness of depression?" (Davis 2014, 67). Davis explicitly separates the "problems" and "bright sides" of impairment, where the problems are related to pain and difficulty and the bright sides are related to the modes of knowledge and relation that any given impairment makes possible. But what if these two sides are not obviously separable? While Davis would certainly acknowledge that the two can never be separated in practice, depression marks a limit case for theory that depends on their separability. As Margaret Price asks of Davis during the course of a "Proliferating Cripistemologies" roundtable: "What do we *do* with depression? With panic attacks and borderline breaks? How do we desire disability when the condition in question is itself composed of pain?" (in Johnson and McRuer 2014b, 162). After all, unlike blindness or deafness, or even impairments that *cause* chronic pain, depression fundamentally *is* feeling bad.

While Davis ultimately rehabilitates the depressive using the social model, it would seem that any value of a politicized depressive identity will require a different kind of orientation to bad feelings, an interest in what one might learn or learn to do if the goal is not affirmation premised on feelings like hope and pride. Developing such an orientation is no simple task because, of course, bad feelings are produced and exacerbated by social structures,

and one must be able to attend to this. But, also, one must expect that there will always be a residue of bad feeling, an unavoidable fact of being embodied, of being a self in a world inevitably split by difference. To read like a depressed transsexual, then, is to read from a position both committed to the idea that trans lives are “lived, hence livable” while also taking feeling bad as a mundane fact (Scheman 1996, 132). In particular, it relies on the depressive’s habit of self-effacement and knowledge of the fundamental fleetingness of self-sameness, habits of thought best exemplified in moments of transition, as in Andrew Solomon’s question about the stability of his self after his first major depression: “What if tomorrow I wake up and I am not myself but a manure beetle?” (2001, 81).

The next section returns to the question of transmasculinity and feminism by rehearsing an often-told story about the persistent conflict between trans and lesbian feminist theory, activism, and communities. In doing so, I ask: what might be made possible by regarding the explicitly annihilatory portrayals of trans people in trans-exclusionary lesbian feminism and by saying, *yes, that is me—so what?*

Gender hurts: The TERF wars

Discussions of political depression emerge from the necessity of finding ways to survive disappointment and to remind ourselves of the persistence of radical visions and ways of living. Rather than a paranoid watch for how forms of resistance are ultimately co-opted, it’s more about noticing and describing the places where it feels like there is something else happening, and passing on strategies for survival. Survival also involves developing a higher tolerance for the conflicts that political life invariably produces—such as those between lesbian separatist and trans communities, gay marriage and antimarriage camps, or antisocial and utopian tendencies—so that groups don’t implode or splinter into factions.

—Ann Cvetkovich (2012, 7)

The quotation above is taken from Ann Cvetkovich’s *Depression: A Public Feeling*, a book largely driven by the keyword *survival*: how might re-fashioning our everyday lives, Cvetkovich asks, help us (queers, women, people of color, the Left) survive the bad feelings engendered by the violent past and the disappointing present so that we can continue to dream of and work toward radical futures? What is being survived in the world of this book ranges from neoliberal subjectivity to political disappointments to writing a dissertation to the legacy of American colonialism/racism. It’s striking, though, how very different these situations are. While the demands

of neoliberal subjectivity may not feel good, they depend on the continued existence of the subject on whom the impossible demands of productive citizenship are made. The legacy of American colonialism/racism, however, is explicitly genocidal. Likewise, the kinds of conflict between “antisocial and utopian tendencies” and “lesbian separatist and trans communities” are profoundly different. In the first, what is being survived is primarily an academic dispute that seems, in the end, somewhat disconnected from the material urgencies of survival. In the second, what is at stake is the physical existence of a category of people.

The tension between lesbian separatist and trans communities has its roots in the women’s movement of the 1970s and 1980s, best demonstrated by the conflict surrounding the publication of Janice Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (1994), which she first published in 1979. While Raymond was not the first to critique transsexuality in the name of feminism, her work has had the most significant effects on our cultural landscape. Taken to be a progressive expert, Raymond provided an evaluation of the social and ethical aspects of transsexuality that was used in the writing of a 1981 National Center for Health Care Technology report on transsexual surgery, which later became the basis of a national coverage determination (NCD) that officially made transsexual surgery ineligible for coverage from public insurance, a decision whose grounds did not come under investigation until 2013.⁵ Thus, the amenability of Raymond’s trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) stance to government policy contributed to a decades-long legal exclusion of trans health care from public insurance, inevitably leading to shortened life spans among trans people who were and are disproportionately impoverished. Because this history animates TERF/trans conflict in the present, trans communities look at the persistence of TERF discourse and understandably feel that our “living space is threatened” (Riddell 2006, 158).

However, precisely because my aims diverge from Cvetkovich’s in that I am less interested in how knowing depression differently might offer insight

⁵ The NCD in question, titled “140.3, Transsexual Surgery,” has since been removed from the *Medicare National Coverage Determinations Manual*. For a full account of the Department of Health and Human Services decision to overturn it, see US Department of Health and Human Services, Departmental Appeals Board decision no. 2576, “NCD 140.3, Transsexual Surgery,” May 30, 2014, <http://www.hhs.gov/dab/decisions/dabdecisions/dab2576.pdf>. For the 1981 report on which NCD 140.3 was based, see Office of Health Research Statistics and Technology (1981). For an analysis of Raymond’s contribution to the coverage decision, see Williams (2014), as well as US Department of Health and Human Services, Departmental Appeals Board, “Supplemental Declaration of Dr. Randi C. Ettner in Support of Complainant,” Complaint *In re* NDC 140.3, 2013, <https://www.glad.org/uploads/docs/publications/medicare/affidavit-ettner-02-redacted.pdf>.

into how to survive the present and more interested in how the habits of thought and feeling associated with depression might allow us to live together, I find Cvetkovich's flattening of the scales of conflict charming. It implies that, somehow, lesbian separatists and trans communities are always already part of a group that is at risk of splintering. What kind of group might that be? What might it mean to be in a group where some of the members are actively trying to make your very existence impossible? How does such a group hang together? Of course, the assumed existence of such an unlikely group has been a condition of trans studies from its very beginning: nowhere else does lesbian feminism so frequently stand in for what feminism *is*.

So, the story.⁶ *The Transsexual Empire* was first published in 1979 and rereleased in 1994 with a new preface that tried to account for transmasculinity and transgender politics. Three years before the initial book, Raymond sent a draft of what would become the fourth chapter of the finished monograph, titled "Sappho by Surgery: The Transsexually Constructed Lesbian Feminist," to the Olivia Women's Music Collective, which had, for two years, included trans woman Sandy Stone as their sound engineer. Olivia responded by denouncing Raymond's account of trans women in general and her depiction of Stone's effect on the collective in particular. Raymond published the chapter anyway, which resulted in the Olivia Collective coming under scrutiny and, ultimately, in Stone's departure from it. In the years following, Stone entered the University of California, Santa Cruz's doctoral program in the history of consciousness and, during that time, penned "The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" (1992), which acted simultaneously as a direct response to Raymond and a call for a transsexual counterdiscourse.

Stone's essay set the initial terms, goals, and methods of trans studies. In her vision, telling authentic stories about trans lives would allow us to move beyond the terms of binary gender that structured feminist and medicolegal discourse in a way that would not only do justice to trans experience but would also "make common cause with other oppositional discourses" (Stone 1992, 164). For Stone, affirming and representing the messy reality of trans lives necessitated a split from feminism that would, in the future, eventually be healed. Trans studies has continued to emerge through repeated performances of splitting from feminism, each time necessarily reasserting the prior existence of a group, often by staging a kind of oedipal drama. For example, in a 2004 special issue of *GLQ*, Susan Stryker writes, "if queer theory was born of the union of sexuality studies and feminism, transgender studies can be considered queer theory's evil twin: it has the same parentage but willfully disrupts the privileged family narratives" (2004,

⁶ For a fuller version of the story, try Susan Stryker's *Transgender History* (2008).

212). Likewise, as indicated by the title of his 2006 book, Bobby Noble considers FTMs the *Sons of the [Feminist] Movement*.

The centrality of pain to the TERF/trans conflict is nowhere more apparent than in the flurry of activity surrounding the recent publication of the aptly titled *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of Transgenderism* (2014) by Sheila Jeffreys, a professor of feminist politics at the University of Melbourne. Just months after its publication, for instance, the *New Yorker* published an article titled “What Is a Woman? The Dispute between Radical Feminism and Transgenderism.” The author, Michelle Goldberg (2014), has subsequently been criticized for being too sympathetic to the TERF argument in that she failed to incorporate the reality of systemic violence against trans people (trans women in particular), refusing to incorporate stories of TERF harassment of trans women (but including instances of harassment in the other direction), and including outdated theories about the etiology of MTF transsexuality without also citing the counterarguments (Serano 2014; Truitt 2014).

While these critiques are necessary and valid, what strikes me is the disjuncture between the overt terms of Goldberg’s article and what she claims is actually at stake. In a supplementary podcast (Goldberg and Talbot 2014), Goldberg focuses on the voice of Alison Turkos, who ostensibly stands in as the representative young, non-TERF, nontrans feminist. Turkos is cochair of the New York Abortion Access Fund, a reproductive justice group that helps to provide access to abortions to those who cannot afford them. “In May,” Goldberg writes, the group “voted unanimously to stop using the word ‘women’ when talking about people who get pregnant, so as not to exclude trans men” (Goldberg 2014). In the podcast, Goldberg explains that this shift in language is what really troubles her about contemporary trans-inclusive feminisms; in order to be on “the right side of history” (Goldberg and Talbot 2014), young feminists are increasingly refusing to refer to their work as being for women. This is the one point on which Goldberg and her correspondent, Margaret Talbot, emphatically agree. For both, to imagine reproductive justice activism, especially access to abortion, as for anyone but women is simply to deny reality in ways that are simultaneously silly and concerning.⁷

⁷ Margaret Talbot’s words on the subject: “Now, I mean, it is true that a female-to-male trans person who has not had a hysterectomy and has chosen to stop taking testosterone and is having unprotected sex, so a lot of categories there, a lot of ifs, could get pregnant unintentionally and seek an abortion. That’s a very, very, I would venture to say, small group. And so I think when you’re addressing reproductive rights it is fair to say that you are essentially addressing women. And I think it’s a little problematic to get so careful about the language that you are kind of denying reality” (in Goldberg and Talbot 2014).

Here, then, is evidence of the limitations of collapsing transfeminine and transmasculine subjects under the sign of *trans*. At present, what is at stake when Goldberg and others insist on “reality” tends to be not only whether trans women are women but also how to understand the relationship between trans men and womanhood, given that the precise arguments TERFs have used to justify excluding trans women would require them to include trans men. As the prominence and visibility of transmasculinities have steadily increased, contemporary feminisms have had to grapple with this incoherence. Still, many conversations about the tense relationship between *trans* and *feminism* continue to focus solely on how many forms of feminism—even those that are less overt about their reliance on biologically essentialist notions of sex/gender—fail trans women in particular. In doing so, however, we miss the way that transmasculinities have, beneath the surface, become a problem for imagining trans-inclusive feminisms, generating an anxiety that disproportionately affects trans women. That is, this article is evidence of the way that anxiety about transmasculine displacement of *women* as the imagined subject of feminism creates a feeling of bafflement that allows the TERF position to seem more closely aligned with reality. What Goldberg’s informant, Turkos, calls the “discomfort” of incorporating nonwomen into reproductive rights feminism, Goldberg and Talbot experience as a kind of annihilation. It is this movement from baffled to threatened that allows Jeffreys to enter the scene as “a sympathetic, if eccentric, character” from whom young feminists might learn a thing or two about the reality of gender (Serano 2014). However, despite the fact that Jeffreys’s book focuses explicit attention on the question of transmasculinity, I don’t think her answers would leave Goldberg any less baffled, as Jeffreys seems to argue that, while it is true that trans men seem to be displacing women, trans men actually need feminism more than women do.

Jeffreys’s argument is basically that, well, gender hurts. Because Jeffreys sees (masculine) power as utterly productive of the social world, gender simply is “the foundation of the political system of male domination” (2014, 1). “Transgenderism,” claims Jeffreys, relies on an idea of gender that strips it of its function as a structure of power that subordinates one kind of body (f) to another (m), and the trans/queer insistence on gender transitivity and fluidity “disappears the fixedness of sex” (5). Because gender is an expression of power, never identity, her explanation for transmasculinity has to do with the ongoingness of female (particularly lesbian) oppression, and transmasculinity is a side effect of the inability to cope with the pain of being female in a situation of $m > f$.

This is, I must admit, a generous reading of Jeffreys. *Gender Hurts* certainly does follow Raymond in making trans people out to be pathetic, iso-

lated, hyperlibidinous, deceptive, narcissistic dupes. In her work, whenever Jeffreys encounters trans people, transmasculine people in particular, she is flooded with bad feelings—she is horrified by what the patriarchy dupes us into doing to our bodies, or she sees us and grieves the loss of a lesbian. Bad feelings produced by gendered oppression are also at the heart of her explanation of the trans desire for masculine identity. Not only does Jeffreys understand the FTM as the product of the mismanaged pain of the lesbian, she also repeatedly suggests that transmasculinity is a direct response to sexual trauma. While I by no means condone Jeffreys's arguments, my reading practice requires this generosity insofar as it requires being willing to lean into worldviews that might be hostile to my very life—to think in the feeling of annihilation, as it were. Additionally, and importantly, there is a tendency within trans-affirmative discourse to dismiss these forms of feminism outright, as outdated or merely hateful “screeds” based on bad science. And yet, they persist and continue to structure mainstream representations of trans lives. For this reason, it seems to me that we too must take them seriously in order to properly understand the appeal.

Further, Jeffreys's rhetorical traffic in pain also works the other way around. For instance, Goldberg closes her article by quoting Sandy Stone in a way that adds to the overall sense of the TERFs as sympathetic: “Of the radical feminists' position, [Stone] says, ‘It's my personal belief, from speaking to some of these people at length, that it comes from having been subject to serious trauma at the hands of some man, or multiple men.’ She adds, ‘You have to respect that. That's their experience of the world.’” But the pain of radical feminists, she insists, can't trump trans rights (Goldberg 2014). Although Goldberg positions Stone's comment as a concession, it is also possible to read it as analogous to Jeffreys's repeated suggestions that transmasculine identity is a product of trauma. A worldview produced by trauma, in both cases, is one that is understandable but not, in the end, of any epistemic value. Feeling bad, they seem to say, obscures rather than clarifies, produces unreliable knowledge about the world. Curious. We seem to have found ourselves in familiar territory. You depressed transsexual. You traumatized white woman. You angry black woman. You melancholic homosexual. How can we possibly take seriously what it is you think you know?

The boys of queer trans theory

When Salamon asks after the ability of a stable transmasculine identity to encounter the desire of the feminine other without either party being annihilated in the process, her examples of this other—the lesbian partner, the

straight partner—suggest that she is asking after lived encounters between trans men and cis women, but Salamon’s question is also relevant to knowledge production. Is it possible, she seems to ask, for lesbian feminist and transmasculine discourses to be in relation without delegitimizing or dismissing each other? The encounter between Jeffreys and transmasculinity would seem to suggest *no*. It’s quite clear that for Jeffreys to recognize transmasculine discourse within her worldview would require her own annihilation as a feminist subject. And while Jeffreys is certainly not a representative lesbian feminist, even those who hold her up as an example of what they resolutely are not are similarly worried about the displacement of f (lesbian, femininity, femme) by m (gay male, masculinity, transmasculine) under the sign of *queer*. After all, doesn’t Salamon ask the question because she is worried the answer might be *no*, even if she would like to think it is not? Likewise, this threat of annihilation drives the split of trans from feminist thinking when Stone urges transsexuals to write themselves into existence in the face of medicolegal and feminist discourse that evacuates *trans* of its lived experience, a split that is continuously repeated in the story trans studies tells about its formation.

Perhaps, then, a revision to Salamon’s question is in order. Not, can *trans* and *feminism* engage without threatening the subjects arrayed underneath each with the feeling of annihilation, but, is this feeling equivalent to actually being annihilated? Does the bad feeling that attends the relation necessarily negate it or render it always and only harmful? After all, reading like a depressed transsexual makes this possibility of annihilation much less threatening. Put bluntly, one real tension in depression is that while the depressed person might not want to keep on existing (at all or, at least, as the version of themselves within a depressive episode), many do. The depressed transsexual, then, might assess this situation and determine that the problem is not so much that (some) feminists would like him gone. Rather, the problem is that he is here, and now we all have to figure out how to live with that.

Noble says something to this effect in “Trans. Panic. Some Thoughts toward a Theory of Feminist Fundamentalism” (2012). His argument is that “*trans* bodies have always been present in feminism as a social movement, even as those bodies have been ghosted by a belief that such bodies have never been a part of feminism or women’s studies” and that responses to trans bodies like those mentioned above—*what about women, what about lesbians*—are evidence of a kind of feminist fundamentalism, an unwillingness and resulting inability to reckon with the trans ghosts haunting her house (Noble 2012, 48). I want to leave this here as an example of what I do not mean when I say that perhaps the first step in learning to live with each other is to recognize that bad feelings go both ways. I do not mean

that of course trans studies will seem antagonistic to feminism as it is what has been ghosted and it is very rare to find a friendly ghost in your attic. This move, it seems, does little more than lift the mask of epistemological innocence from feminist studies and project it onto trans studies. And Noble, I'm certain, knows this, which is why he argues for an understanding of *trans* that isn't reducible to cross-gender identification or embodied gender nonnormativity. Instead, *trans* names a project of undoing (gender, disciplines, selves), a project that cannot be haunted because it never tries to build a house. Except, as Noble also knows, in practice the self—his self in fact—is resistant to being undone. For example, in the course of his argument, Noble suggests that his own women's studies department is guilty of such feminist fundamentalism, as evidenced by its exclusive use of she/her pronouns in its materials, despite his presence on the faculty. But, what is this desire for language other than the desire of the self to be recognized? And doesn't asking that this desire be filled inevitably produce and then deny its own ghosts?

In particular, one familiar ghost emerges from reading Noble and Jack Halberstam, to whom Noble's work is indebted. Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (1998) is remarkable in that it is the first book-length study of masculinity embodied by people assigned female at birth. In contrast to formulations like Jeffreys's, Halberstam's book sets out to investigate female masculinities as distinct genders with their own histories, rather than pathological imitations of maleness. Further, Halberstam argues that "if what we call 'dominant masculinity' appears to be a naturalized relation between maleness and power, then it makes little sense to examine men for the contours of that masculinity's social construction. Masculinity . . . becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the male middle-class body" (1998, 2). The claim is not only that it is necessary to study "masculinity without men" (1) but also that in doing so one will be able to know what masculinity *is*, unlinked from "power and domination" (2).

In addition, Halberstam clearly articulates a set of personal/political stakes, stating "this book is an attempt to make my own female masculinity plausible, credible, and real" and, by extension, an attempt to make female masculinities in the future plausible, credible, and real (1998, 19). The violence of the persistent non- or misrecognition of female masculinity is especially evident in Halberstam's elaboration of the tomboy narrative, a coming-of-age story marked by the forced movement from the relative freedom of tolerated tomboyism into the constraints of "compliant forms of femininity" (6). The inevitability of this narrative is precisely what Halberstam's project, in this book and in work that follows, seeks to refuse. In *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam argues that preadulthood is the space where

the tomboy is allowed to flourish, and by *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005), Halberstam has made “extended adolescence” synonymous with the resistant time/space of *queer*.

As opposed to Lee Edelman’s infamous assertion that “queerness names the side of those not ‘fighting for the children’” (2004, 3), Halberstam’s *Queer Time and Place* suggests that queerness names the site of those who never left childhood behind. Queerness, in this formulation, is “an outcome of strange temporalities” that “develop in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction,” which produce and define “straight time” (Halberstam 2005, 1). Because these institutions rely on a common narrative about maturation that “charts an obvious transition out of childish dependency through marriage and into adult responsibility through reproduction,” interrupting this narrative allows for a proliferation of queer lives, genders, and futures (153). While Edelman aligns a queerness outside of these logics as fundamentally against the future—figured, for him, by the likes of Scrooge, Captain Hook, and Voldemort—for Halberstam the queer refusal to grow up is what allows for the potential for other futures, aligning queerness more easily with Tiny Tim, *the boy who did not die*; Peter Pan, *the boy* (played onstage by an adult woman) *who wouldn’t grow up*; and Harry Potter, *the boy who lived*.

Although this band of boys comes from Edelman, *Queer Time and Place* is characterized by a deep investment in and affirmative attachment to the feminist potential of *the boy* as an alternative to dominant and dominating masculinities. For example, in one of the book’s closing scenes, Halberstam watches as a troupe of drag kings unlocks the heterotopia of queer time/space: “This is rather an intricate performance of butch masculinity, queer masculinity that presents itself to screaming girls as a safe alternative to hetero-masculinities. . . . When the Backstreet Boys croon ‘I want it THAT way’ and the girls scream, we think for a moment that it does not have to be *this* way and that just maybe girl and boy partial identities can be carried forward into adulthood in terms of a politics of refusal—the refusal to grow up and enter the heteronormative adulthoods implied by these concepts of progress and maturity” (Halberstam 2005, 179). Similarly, Noble writes that “the appeal of the boy is . . . the potential for its refusal of the teleological imperatives of manhood. . . . Boys paradoxically threaten to become men while categorically rarely materializing and, more often than not, refusing that identity outright,” with the effect, again, being the possibility of refashioning politically viable (feminist) masculinities (Noble 2006, 47). So, the story that Noble and Halberstam tell about the boy as a transed masculinity—not necessarily female masculinity but masculinity without

phallic power—is that not only does he have more fun, he also refashions masculinity for the movement.

This is a nice story, insofar as everyone involved walks away feeling good. Transmasculinity is rescued from both pathology and misogyny, and feminism has incorporated a new subject. But it strikes me that this story is obviously being told from the boy's perspective. Narrated from the perspective of the girl, who keeps popping up at the edges of the conversation, screaming as a mass from offstage, the boy's story seems to be yet another story of her displacement. In both Halberstam and Noble's defense of boyhood, female femininity is aligned with the static and decidedly unqueer time/space of adulthood.⁸ Halberstam in particular, in an effort to affirm female masculinities, displaces the boy's bad feelings onto the girl, associating female femininities with "unhealthy body manipulations from anorexia to high-heeled shoes" and suggesting that "perhaps femininity . . . should be chosen later on" (Halberstam 1998, 268–69). Paralleling the activist language that troubles Goldberg, as the boy emerges as a feminist subject the girl is told it might be better if she all but disappeared. While I'm not the first to liken queer boys to Peter Pan, what everyone seems to forget is that Wendy effectively loses her childhood in Neverland. The boy, just like his most famous representation, gets all the attention while the girl misses out on all the fun.

Loving transfeminism?

Which brings me, finally, to the point. There has been a serious, ongoing effort to produce something called *transfeminism*, driven by the sense that if the bodies of knowledge arranged under the two terms *trans* and *feminism* sit together long enough at the same table—sometimes joined by *queer*, sometimes not—we will be able to produce some theory of gender, some political stance that adequately incorporates both. This sense is modeled in the introduction to the recent *Transfeminist Perspectives* anthology, which begins by noticing that, although they are "intimately connected to one another," *trans* and *feminist* "are far from integrated" (Enke 2012, 2). The anthology's intervention is that "at the simplest level [it] offers multidisciplinary models for *integrating* feminist and transgender theory, practice, and pedagogy" (2; emphasis added). As an alternative to striving for integration, I close by briefly sketching an answer to a question I posed

⁸ To be fair, Noble ends his book with a discussion of the queer femme, in which femme does for femininity what boy/trans does for masculinity.

at the beginning of this piece regarding what might happen if we allowed ourselves to read with, rather than against, depressive forms of feeling and habits of thought. That is, what might our expectations for trans/feminist thought oriented to social justice be if we took pain—in this case the psychic pain produced in the encounter between competing theories of gender that seem aimed at each other’s annihilation—as a given, not necessarily loaded with moral weight?

Perhaps the paradigmatic call for transfeminist integration comes in “The Transfeminist Manifesto,” in which Emi Koyama defines transfeminism as “primarily a movement by and for trans women who view their liberation to be intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond” (Koyama 2003, 245). In a postscript, Koyama concedes that her articulation of transfeminism centered the perspectives of male-to-female trans people “at the expense of female-to-male trans people and others who identify as transgender or genderqueer” and that this “was a mistake” (258). I want to be clear that this straightforward version of transfeminism, one that understands trans women as women, is not what is at issue here. And while, of course, trans women must also deal with the added risk of both being seen as women and as failing to be so, as antiracist, queer, and disability feminisms remind us, related forms of this double bind also structure the lives of crip women, queer women, and women of color. Given that intersectional feminist scholars and activists continue to have to reassert the failures of feminisms that, like Jeffreys’s, imagine *woman* as a monolithic category, perhaps this is not yet an obvious thing to say; still, it seems to me that Koyama’s version of transfeminism might simply be called feminism.

Trans women, of course, does not exhaust the content of *trans*. But rather than setting out to correct Koyama’s “mistake,” I would like to suggest that her essay’s straightforward articulation, backtracking, and pointing to a hole it does not then try to fill performs the structure of the relation between *feminism* and *trans(masculinity)*. In pointing to the “mistake” and “leaving the task to others” to correct it, Koyama repeats the deferral first performed in Stone’s foundational manifesto, in which she promises an essay dealing with transmasculinity that has yet to materialize, two decades later (Koyama 2003, 258, 259). Likewise, transmasculine narratives that produce the boy as a feminist masculinity often rely on the deferral of the girl.

However, this is certainly not to say that the stories *transmasculinity* and *feminism* tell are antithetical, do not need each other, or have no hope of living in productive relation. Although I may have implied that Wendy gets nothing from her trip to Neverland, we all know that’s not exactly true. The story of Peter and Wendy, after all, does not rely on Wendy embodying the

clichés of early twentieth-century femininity as she does in J. M. Barrie’s inaugural version. For instance, in the 2003 film version, Wendy does not run away to Neverland because she has fallen in love with a boy who has broken into her bedroom. Instead, finding herself at the edge of puberty, Wendy senses that the specter of womanhood is unfairly closing down her life options—she is to be a wife and not a novelist. Additionally, Wendy is the narrator of her own story, “knows a thing or two about pirates” (and momentarily becomes one), and is deft with a sword, actively participating in her adventures in Neverland, rather than simply standing on the sidelines “watching Peter with glistening eyes” (Barrie [1911] 2005, 138). While it is certainly true that Barrie’s *Peter and Wendy* (the novel’s original title) accepts and amusingly enacts, as feminist literary critic Susan S. Kissel argues, “the drama of gender” (1988), the enduringness of the story—its queer appeal and its ability to withstand multiple revisions of the content of gender—is a result of its enactment of the drama of desire: at its core it has remained a story about the promise and failure of love to anchor us to each other and to the world. It is a fairy tale that, quite literally, cites *happily ever after* only to mark it as an impossibility, endlessly deferred.

“Love,” writes Lauren Berlant, “is the embracing dream in which desire is reciprocated: rather than being isolating, love provides an image of an expanded self, the normative version of which is the two-as-one intimacy of the couple form. In the idealized image of their relation, desire will lead to love, which will make a world for desire’s endurance” (2012, 6–7). This quotation is taken from *Desire/Love*, a dictionary entry turned short book-length meditation on how that primary self-interrupting drive, desire, is recruited into the self-stabilizing normative love plot. But, in each iteration of Peter and Wendy, the closure that the love plot promises—the ever after—is deferred to Peter and Jane, and then Peter and Margaret, and on and on. This is because, although their desire for each other is reciprocated, and their love brings Wendy to Neverland and, in the film, rescues Peter from certain death, there is no shared world, neither the fantasy of Neverland nor the dreary ongoingness of reality, in which their desire can endure (*Peter Pan* 2003). Although misrecognition is a constitutive feature of all desire—our objects never fulfill the promises we would like to think they have made—the promises Peter and Wendy would like the other to make are ultimately incommensurable. Even so, even though they cannot maintain their two-as-oneness, the love between them forever alters each one’s story. But perhaps I have taken this analogy too far. All I wanted to do was ask a question: what if we think of the relation between *trans* and *feminism* as *love*? Halberstam’s boys perform onstage for a crowd of screaming girls, and who could describe this as anything but a relation of mutual de-

sire? Enke notices an intimate connection and, in compiling an anthology, hopes to initiate a merge. Salamon asks whether the lesbian feminist and the trans man can desire each other without annihilating the other in the process. Noble argues that *trans* and *feminist* were, in the beginning, not two terms but one, and who cannot hear Hedwig begin to sing in the background of his lament?⁹ Finally, Jeffreys will not agree, but I suspect that a certain level of love underlies and drives her grief at the emergence of FTM transsexuality, an object that refuses to give her what she wants.

Love, that is, does not necessarily name a happy relation. Berlant, again, offers a useful definition: “To phrase ‘the object of desire’ as a cluster of promises is to allow us to encounter what’s incoherent or enigmatic in our attachments, not as confirmations of our irrationality but as an explanation of our sense of *our endurance in the object*” (Berlant 2011, 23). This is perhaps why the relation between trans and feminist remains so fraught: each sees in the other something that will ensure its own endurance. Incorporating *trans* as an object grants feminism interpretive power in a landscape where gender cannot be said to include only men and women, m’s and f’s. On the other hand, incorporating *feminism* as a mode of analysis provides trans with a language of power and a political stance to rescue it from accusations of being a sign of gender’s ultimate commodification. Like my drawn-out analogy to Peter and Wendy, although *trans* and *feminism* want each other—need each other, even—*what* each wants from the other is not only not identical but may require the other to inhabit a world incommensurable with its own desires. TERFs aside, many forms of queer feminism seem to want from *trans* confirmation that there is no predictable, and thereby no fixed, difference between m and f. Trans, on the other hand, and despite protests to the contrary, is quite attached to a version of m/f (why else the insistence that you use “my” pronouns to address me?) but wants from feminism a way of interrupting the process by which m/f reproduces m > f. Transmasculinity, in particular, wants this both because he loves feminism and wants her to get what he think she wants, but also be-

⁹ Hedwig, the protagonist of John Cameron Mitchell’s rock musical and film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, is a debatably transgender rock singer, aching to feel unified, whole. “Origin of Love”—the song that organizes the pathos of the show and that I encourage you to hear playing in the background of my argument—rewrites Aristophanes’s speech on love in Plato’s *Symposium*, which, famously, provides a mythic story of the origin of human nature. In this account, we were once round, powerful, two-faced creatures but, cut down to our current size by threatened (and threatening) gods, have been left to perpetually and painfully seek our former unity. As Hedwig croons: “That’s the pain, cuts a straight line down through the heart; we call it love.”

cause there is as of now no better discourse he can speak to articulate the harms he incurred for failing to be f.

If *love* describes the persistent sense that trans(masculinity) and feminism were once one and will be again, it also will always defer this merge until one accepts the other's "fantasy/realism as the condition of their encounter" (Berlant 2012, 106). Until then, Peter will continue to return to the window, and trans and feminism will continue to produce monographs, anthologies, controversies, and so on. These relations, defined as they are by continual deferral, will likely leave no one feeling good, but isn't this, the depressed transsexual asks, a precondition for relating at all?¹⁰ Desire, that which causes us to reach for something outside of ourselves, always arises from a wound that we would like the object of our desire to heal. And although desire always exceeds the object, although the wound remains open, we remain attached both because the promise of closure is not broken, merely and perpetually deferred, but also and most importantly because something usable is produced by the attachment.

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¹⁰ Underlying this formulation—that depressives are more likely to sit in the painful/jagged realities of love that the fantasy of the love plot smooths over—is the widely circulating "depressive realism" hypothesis (Alloy et al. 1990), which posits that depressed people judge reality more accurately than nondepressed people, likely because of a willingness to accept contingency. While "depressive realism" is attributed to psychologists Lauren Alloy and Lyn Abramson (Alloy and Abramson 1979; Alloy et al. 1990), it resonates with Freud's thoughts on the melancholic's "keener eye for the truth" ([1917] 1953, 246).

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